

China–Middle East Relations in Light of Obama’s Pivot to the Pacific

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As the United States perceives the westward expansion of China’s influence as threatening both regional and worldwide balances of power, it has responded with an understandable but ill-conceived counter-action—the ‘Obama pivot’ from the Middle East to the Western Pacific. The new American thinking aims to divide the intercontinental and transoceanic regions that China and other nations want to integrate, while encouraging an ‘encircle China’ coalition among smaller maritime powers from India and Singapore to Australia and Vietnam and on to the Philippines, Japan and South Korea. The blind spot in the American plan is that all of these countries need China more than they need the United States. None of them wants a military alliance with Washington that will antagonise Beijing because their economic futures pull them inexorably towards greater integration with the mainland’s vast and growing markets. Obama’s eastward focus attempts to stem the powerful current of Islamic countries that have strengthened ties with China while quarrelling with the United States. A growing number of former American allies, including some that were virtual American dependencies, are now hedging their bets with more independent foreign policies that actively court Chinese investment, trade, military cooperation and diplomatic support.

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China’s leaders usually view the Middle East in the larger context of global strategies that can advance national wealth and power. They see the Middle East as part of a wider region including Central Asia that borders China and shares cultural and religious ties with China’s vast Muslim population (Liu 2004; Zhang and Li 2004). From this perspective, Central Asia is China’s backyard and the Middle East is a neighbour’s neighbour (Beckwith 2009). Equally important, Middle Eastern ports connect with China across long sea routes spanning the Indian and Pacific Oceans where navigation is controlled by American warships that can disrupt Chinese commerce at several choke points in case of hostilities (Kaplan 2010; Liu 2009). Thus, by land and by

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sea, China's lifelines pass through the length and breadth of the Islamic world with the Greater Middle East—including Caspian and Central Asian pipelines—and the Indian Ocean Basin at the centre (Qian 2007).

Chinese policymakers also see the Middle East–Central Asia region as a gateway connecting the Western Pacific with Europe, South Asia and Africa, and eventually with Latin America as well. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, China has become the leading proponent of Eurasian integration. This means not merely a revival of the continental and maritime Silk Roads, but an assertive post-colonial vision of 'Eurasia for the Eurasians' where non-Western civilisations regain equal respect and influence and where 'New World' guests are welcome as partners but not as masters. As wealth and power shift to the east, China's influence is spreading rapidly to the west. Bankers and engineers from China are teaming up with counterparts from Turkey, Germany, Korea, Pakistan and the Persian Gulf to build trans-continental networks of trains, roads, pipelines, dams and power stations running from London and Vienna to Shanghai and Guangzhou.

American military and diplomatic strategists are acutely aware of the dangers of a more integrated Eurasian landmass, particularly if it is fashioned to suit China's economic and political preferences (Kissinger 2011). Many in Washington fear that China's Eurasian vocation goes far beyond rivalling Russian influence in Central Asia. They suspect that Beijing also seeks to pull the European Community further away from a divided Atlantic alliance, to exploit America's self-inflicted wounds in the Middle East, and to corner the market on Africa's minerals and development projects. Most of all, they dread the prospect of a Eurasian superpower that could hamper American action in the Eastern Hemisphere and undermine Washington's claims to exclusive control over Latin America.

From the Monroe Doctrine to the Marshall Plan, the cardinal rule of United States diplomacy has been to preserve the Western Hemisphere as America's sphere of influence while preventing any other nation or coalition from gaining similar dominance in the Eastern Hemisphere (Walt 2011). This is the 'core interest' that guides Washington's consideration of all other interests. Unlike China's definition of core interests as concrete territories—Taiwan, Tibet, Xinjiang and more recently the South China Sea—America's red line is drawn around more subjective and shifting assessments of relative power and global intensions.

As the United States perceives the westward expansion of China's influence as threatening both regional and worldwide balances of power, it has responded with an understandable but ill-conceived counter-action—the 'Obama pivot' from the Middle East to the Western Pacific. The new American thinking aims to divide the inter-continental and trans-oceanic regions that China and other nations want to integrate while encouraging an 'encircle China' coalition among smaller maritime powers from India and Singapore to Australia and Vietnam and on to the Philippines, Japan and South Korea (Garver and Wang 2010).

The blind spot in the American plan is that all of these countries need China more than they need the United States. None of them wants a military alliance with

Washington that will antagonise Beijing because their economic futures pull them inexorably to greater integration with the mainland's vast and growing markets. China's neighbours might feel vulnerable enough to welcome outside guarantees against any temptation for Beijing to play the bully instead of the benefactor, but their nationalist traditions deeply resist moving in a pro-American orbit. Even as they warm to the prospect of continued American visits to their ports, many of them suspect that eventually the US will hang them out to dry by cutting a deal with China to divide the Pacific into spheres of influence.

Obama's eastward focus attempts to stem the powerful current of Islamic countries that have strengthened ties with China while quarrelling more and more with the US. A growing number of former American allies, including some that were virtual US dependencies, are now hedging their bets with more independent foreign policies that actively court Chinese investment, trade, military cooperation and diplomatic support (Sun 2007). The most notable examples are Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan, the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council and more recently, Egypt, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Indonesia flatly rejected American efforts to mediate conflicting territorial claims in the South China Sea and to lead patrolling the Makassar and Malacca Straits. Turkey frequently angers Washington by siding with Iran, Palestine and Iraqi Sunnis, and when NATO backed out of joint military exercises in Turkey because Ankara excluded Israel, the Chinese Air Force was quick to fill the gap, making its first overseas flights in history over Konya. Pakistan was so infuriated by American military incursions and support for India's nuclear programme that it pledged to expand its Chinese-backed arms industry and to accelerate pipeline construction, linking Iran to Xinjiang. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states offered China a handsome package of long-term energy deals, construction projects and joint investments in return for Beijing not vetoing United Nations Security Council decisions to impose sanctions against Iran's nuclear enrichment activities. And now that American-sponsored rule is crumbling in Afghanistan, Iraq and Egypt, those countries are adding to the ranks of independent-minded actors seeking a counter-balance to excessive dependence on Washington's largesse.

Obama's foreign policy team would like to disengage from the string of Middle Eastern failures that has sapped American prestige and influence for more than a decade and shift to the more urgent task of parrying China's expansion in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. In fact, the US will probably have to deal with a series of crises in both the Middle East and Asia at the same time; and flashpoints in one region will more quickly aggravate tensions in the other. Washington's desire to separate the Middle Eastern and Far Eastern theatres seems particularly futile as the forces of integration and interdependence gather steam throughout Asia and Europe, inspiring visions of a seamless market and community from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

At most, the Obama administration might hope to slow the momentum of China's westward push, but they cannot reverse it. Washington wants to put China on the defensive, but that is precisely where Chinese diplomats and soldiers are most

comfortable and most skilled. They are accustomed to deflecting the advances of stronger powers—particularly distant nations that are overextended geographically and economically—and to focusing stress on their weakest points until they flounder and retreat. A frustrated superpower licking its wounds from defeat after defeat in the Middle East could find no more certain graveyard than the endless seas and struggles of a rising Asia raven by nationalist hatreds and caught in a spiralling arms race.

CHINA'S DUAL DESTINY—THE MONGOL VOCATION AND THE CELEBRATION OF ZHENG HE

The trans-continental ambitions of Chinese nationalism are vividly portrayed in the official reworking of history that popularises and romanticises pre-modern imperial connections across the Eastern Hemisphere and throughout the Indian Ocean Basin, including the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea and the farthest shores of Africa. Chinese historical imagination increasingly highlights the legacy of the Chinese Mongol dynasty, the Yuan, and its affinities with other Mongol successor states that briefly ruled the vast realms of Confucianism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity. In their Sinicised incarnation, the Yuan have been rehabilitated as a Chinese dynasty instead of a barbarian occupation and their hybrid culture and ethnicity are viewed as natural bridges between China and other world civilisations, both Western and non-Western.

Admiral Zheng He, the Chinese Muslim explorer of the Ming dynasty who led seven maritime expeditions of 'treasure ships', has been transformed into a marvelously multivalent icon of peaceful expansion, Sino-Islamic brotherhood and Third World solidarity (Ningxia People's Press 2006). From the perspective of Chinese domestic politics and foreign relations, Zheng He's personal journey of assimilation and empowerment is as important as his voyages. His legendary rise from prisoner of war to imperial confidante and then to China's most famous ambassador holds a special attraction for the Muslims of China—particularly the pivotal Han-speaking Hui who reside in every corner of the country—as well as for Muslims around the world who want to know where China stands in the so-called clashes and dialogues of civilisations.

The Mongol and Zheng He narratives frequently intersect and reinforce one another. Nanjing University is the home of a new Yuan Studies Centre that explores the history of Islam in China, portraying Muslim cultures as national resources instead of subversive dangers and as indigenous creations instead of foreign implants. It gathers top Muslim students from across the nation, particularly multilingual Hui from the strategic borderlands of Yunnan, Xinjiang and Ningxia, who shift freely between Chinese, Arabic and English as they compare notes on how their communities manage to blend local traditions with universal Islamic principles. Over the last decade, the Centre has also taken the lead in organising a series of international dialogues between Confucian, Islamic and Western scholars in China, North America, Europe

and Southeast Asia. It has become a hub of China's triple outreach to its own Muslims, to Islamic markets abroad and to reform-minded scholars of Confucianism and Christianity (Hua 2003, 2006).

Nanjing was also the capital of the early Ming dynasty where Zheng He supervised the shipyards that built his armadas. When China celebrated the six hundredth anniversary of his earliest voyage in 2005, Nanjing was the centre for a yearlong flood of exhibitions and festivities not only on the mainland, but also in the Chinese diaspora communities throughout Southeast Asia and beyond (Wang Gungwu 2005). Islamic historians and scholars were invited to international conferences that produced at least a dozen anthologies showcasing China's ancient and continuous exchanges with Muslim lands in every part of Asia and Africa. The political messages were timely and well-articulated: China expanded its influence through peaceful trade instead of military conquest; China respected and partnered with other cultures, valuing mutual learning and eschewing interference with local traditions; China is a sister civilisation of Islam that has survived similar humiliations at the hands of Western imperialism and is now recovering its historic dignity and grandeur.

During the last decade, Zheng He has grown into the essential synthesis of China's ideal self-image at home and abroad—the organic link between assimilated Mongol rule and Han restoration after the Ming insurgency; the trusted imperial commander who planned decisive campaigns on land and at sea; the loyal Muslim who combined the best of traditional religion, modern science and patriotic dedication; and the peaceful messenger who spread China's influence and glory to the farthest frontiers (Branigan 2010).

Equally important is the persistent and pointed contrast between Zheng He and his European successors, particularly Christopher Columbus. Chinese depictions commonly stress the puniness of Columbus' ships compared to Zheng He's floating cities. They highlight Columbus' confusion over what he had discovered, his extermination of native populations, his perfidious dealings with European monarchs and clerics, and his tragic humiliation after a lifetime of self-aggrandisement.

MAINSTREAMING CHINESE ISLAM

Islam is flourishing in China today primarily because the party and government have struck a bargain with much of the Hui community's religious and professional leadership on how they can enhance the goals of economic development, political quiescence and international acceptance. The core of the bargain is an official pledge to condemn the atheistic excesses of the Cultural Revolution in return for Muslim denunciations of the 'three evils' of terrorism, extremism and separatism. Under this formula, Hui Muslims enjoy unprecedented freedom of religion while the security forces turn their sights on more troublesome targets, including the Turkic-speaking Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists, Catholics who remain loyal to Rome, the Protestant home church movements and wildfire 'cults' such as the Falun Gong (Hayoun 2012).

The benefits for Chinese-speaking Muslims have been enormous. The state encourages and actively sponsors a host of Islamic activities including religious education, mosque building, charitable work, *hajj* organisation, halal food production, religious tourism, publishing, internet communities, overseas study, exports to Muslim markets, joint ventures with foreign businesses and foundations and occasionally, even religious instructors from Pakistan where Beijing is particularly eager to build independent relations with private Islamic associations (Zhu 2010a). In villages and towns where the wounds of the Cultural Revolution are still healing, local party and government leaders openly recruit Islamic teachers and imams to mediate their relations with business and citizens' groups who remain suspicious of central authority (Gui Rong 2009). In return, Muslim religious and business elites often urge their most promising students to join the Communist Party, hoping they will rise to positions of authority that will eventually benefit their kinsmen even at the price of abandoning public worship.

State patronage extends far beyond the religious officialdom to promote a rising middle class of Muslim businesses, professionals and intellectuals. Muslim university graduates can now look beyond their families' traditional niches in the private sector to find positions in the many state-run companies with overseas operations, especially the energy, construction and financial firms springing up across the Middle East and Africa (Agence France-Presse 2009). Students trained in Arabic, Persian or Islamic studies take up faculty positions in the string of 'nationalities universities' that connect the interior provinces with the big cities and the east coast.

More young Muslims are moving into top-flight universities and government think tanks where they quickly transition from religious and humanistic studies to the social sciences and international relations. Their scholarly works and policy analyses have become regular features in the established area studies journals, the press and television news programmes. Several of these Muslim scholars have become prominent advisors on foreign policy, widely respected for their expertise on the Middle East and the Islamic world (Ma 2007, 2009).

THE HAJJ AND THE GREAT WEST

One of the most extraordinary signs of Islamic vitality in China is the rapid growth of the state-sponsored pilgrimage to Mecca. Until the 1980s, the Communist Party obstructed and suppressed the *hajj*, fearing that exposure to international Islamic currents would radicalise Chinese Muslims, especially in the tense borderlands where the Soviets were always ready to exploit ethnic and religious conflict (Horner 2002, Horner and Brown 2010). The post-Mao reform and opening gradually relaxed these restrictions, allowing a trickle and then a steady flow of pilgrims that now exceeds 14,000 per year. The bulk of China's *hajjis* come from the predominately Hui communities of the northwest provinces—the multi-ethnic and multi-religious crossroads where Han, Hui, Mongol, Tibetan and Turkic cultures intersect (*Al-Jazeera* 2009;

Han 2010). This is precisely the region that Beijing's planners and strategists have identified as China's future heartland in terms of economic development, security threats and political rivalries.

Developing the Great West is the linchpin of Chinese economic growth for the next generation because it will spread prosperity from the privileged coast to the secondary cities of the neglected interior. It is central to security not only because of the volatile brew of ethnic animosities in the borderlands, but because China's air force has repositioned its land-based nuclear deterrent to the west to protect it from the naval and air attacks that are certain to capture or destroy the coastal cities in case of all-out war (Phoenix Weekly 2010). Moreover, the west is vital politically because it will likely hold the balance of power in future showdowns between the evenly matched northern and southern regions if China moves toward electoral democracy or regional tests of strength.

In this context, the loyalty and patriotism of Hui Muslims tops the list of military, economic and political concerns of any government in Beijing. The Hui are too powerful to suppress and too unreliable to ignore. They must be carefully managed, regulated, subsidised, indoctrinated, assimilated, co-opted and prominently displayed as model citizens and modern achievers.

Having consolidated the government-led *hajj* as a prerequisite of north-western Hui Muslims, Beijing is now eager to expand the project to include the rebellious Uyghurs of Xinjiang. After decades of avoidance and denial, the government has at last admitted that most Chinese *hajjis* are illegal pilgrims from Xinjiang who travel without visas and often without passports, transiting through Pakistan and Turkey with the aid of overseas kinsmen who frequently are political exiles and campaigners for independent statehood (Yao 2009). The escalation of communal violence in Xinjiang has finally convinced Beijing that only a combination of jobs and religious freedoms can save their vital link to Eurasia's indispensable energy resources and markets (Bovington 2010). Hence, the simultaneous decisions to transform Xinjiang into western China's largest international free trade zone and its pre-eminent staging centre for the *hajj*.

CURRENCY WARS

In addition to the *hajj*, Saudi Arabia plays a central role in China's aspiration to promote its currency in international trade while dethroning the dollar as the global standard of value. Chinese analysts correctly conclude that Saudi Arabia's policy of conducting oil transactions exclusively in dollars is vital to America's financial and political dominance. As American politicians increase their demands on China to revalue the Yuan, the Chinese fight back with mega-transactions that internationalise their currency as an alternative medium of exchange (Fisk 2009).

While economists disagree on whether the Yuan is undervalued, international lawyers generally concur that there is no remedy available to plaintiff nations in these

types of disputes (Roach 2010). Indeed, some economists argue that an overvalued Yuan is a proper trade-off for China's agreement to abide by World Trade Organisation prohibitions on direct government subsidies to exporters (Rodrik 2009). This leaves Chinese bankers enormous latitude to woo trading partners into currency swaps and special investment packages that no other nation can provide (Prasad and Lei 2012). As the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council become increasingly critical of America's positions towards Palestine and Iran, they are more receptive to China's attack on the dollar (Zhang 2009). Washington is on notice—it can adjust its Middle Eastern policies or jeopardise its financial integrity in the region and around the world.

THE LIBYA EXPEDITION

China's evacuation of nearly 36,000 nationals during the Libyan revolution was a heroic rescue operation by sea and air that would have been the envy of Zheng He himself. Chinese warships moved from the Gulf of Aden where they were hunting Somali pirates through the Suez Canal and into the Mediterranean for the first time in history. They were soon followed by a group of transport planes that flew directly from Xinjiang to the Libyan Desert to collect the remaining workers who were unable to reach the coast.

In less than a month, Beijing had impressed several audiences with its global military reach. It showed nationalist critics at home that it would spare no effort to protect its teeming communities of overseas workers. It alerted Middle Eastern and African nations that its rising commercial profile would be backed up with force when necessary. And, most importantly, it reminded NATO powers that they no longer enjoyed exclusive access to North African territory and resources.

PONDERING THE NEW EGYPT

Just when Chinese investments in Libya seemed to slip away because of Beijing's belated embrace of the revolution, Egypt offered even greater opportunities for political as well as economic gains. A more independent Egypt seeking new friends and ready to trade its diplomatic influence for economic relief holds tantalising possibilities for every wing of China's interlocking military-commercial-political elite (Chen 2010). As tensions multiply between Washington and Cairo, China weighs the countless routes that an Egyptian partnership could open to the Middle East, Africa and Europe.

Many Chinese writers expect that Egypt will move closer to Turkey, creating its own version of democracy and capitalism inspired by Islamic principles. They opine that a budding Turkish–Egyptian connection might help China by counter-balancing Iran and better managing its hostilities with the Persian Gulf Arabs and Israel (Wu 2011). The

more fluid balance of power that China contemplates in the Middle East is a perfect counterpart to the multi-polar international system it envisions in the post-American world order. On both levels, numerous nations would be free to form and break quasi-alliances instead of herding into rigid blocks dominated by opposing superpowers. Of course, no one really knows if multi-polar politics will encourage more conflict or less, either regionally or globally. However, from the perspective of a rising but still secondary world power, the obvious advantage lies in the ability to erode the influence of a stronger rival without having to fight wars that you will probably lose.

THE PROBLEM OF TIMING

There is still no consensus in Beijing on overall Middle East policy, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings. Where some see opportunities others see traps. For every voice urging the leadership to exploit America's misfortunes, there is a counter-argument that the United States should be left to stew in its own mess. And there is always a faction of inveterate sceptics, including those who claim to see 'two Asias'—the Far East basking in progress and harmony, versus the Middle East consumed by hatred and producing nothing but oil and war (Yin 2008).

China's foreign policy journals and think tanks are filled with cost-benefit analyses of countless policy options for dealing with Middle Eastern problems (Li 2010; Liu 2004; Wang 2011; Zhu Liqun 2010). Even when writers recognise a substantial upside, their lists of caveats and warnings of unanticipated consequences must chill the bones of all but the most intrepid decision-makers (Gao 2005; Jin 2008; Li Hongjie 2009; Li Weijian 2009; Wang 2007). In the wider context of the ongoing debate over whether China's overseas presence is too timid or too bold, the violence and unpredictability of the Middle East tip the scales in favour of prudence (Dong and Li 2010; Godement 2011; Zhu 2010b). America's desire to look towards the Pacific is read as an admission of failure—a thin cover for hasty retreat from a land of sorrows and humiliations. Why take over America's headaches when it feels so good to see their pain? Better to wait and see what they are willing to offer us in return.

China is preparing to help clean up the mess in Afghanistan and Iraq, but only with plenty of company from neighbours and international organisations. Iran is worth propping up as long as sanctions-busting is profitable and war is continually postponed, but China is in no hurry to throw more men and money into oil fields that are certain to be prime targets. The same logic applies to Syria, where China is free of the frozen commitments that tie Russia to Assad and the Americans to Israel. Beijing has no need to save the Ba'athists, but it is determined to restore the leash that NATO snapped during the Libyan operation. When a Western sphere of influence is in turmoil, what is the point of helping to shore up the status quo? After the smoke begins to clear, there will be plenty of time to mend fences and make friends with the survivors.

THE VIRUS IN THE HOMELAND

The detachment and objectivity that Chinese leaders show concerning upheavals in the Middle East quickly evaporate when they contemplate the reverberations among their own people. When the Arab peoples speak so eloquently of re-launching their unfinished revolutions, how can patriotic Chinese with any sense of history fail to recall the origins of their own modern Renaissance in the May Fourth Movement and the New Culture Movement? And how can one invoke the glories of 1919 without confronting the tragedies of 1989?

Whether or not they admit it in public, China's leaders know that their society is already in a constant state of revolt. The new Arab Awakening has hit the Communist Party's rawest nerve—the open secret that one-party rule is exhausted and that nothing exists to replace it. The democratic surge in the Middle East has not created any of China's domestic discontents, but it has emboldened people from all walks of life to say candidly what they only dared to whisper before—that China's rulers can punish and steal, but they cannot govern.

The great irony of the Arab revolts is that just when China's leaders see America losing ground in its prized overseas dominions, they are feeling the ground crumble beneath their own feet at home. 'Reform' is on the lips of every Chinese politician and commentator, including multiple proposals for freedom of expression and competitive elections (Bandurski 2011; Strategypage.com 2010). Infighting among party factions is increasingly public and pervasive in Beijing and particularly in the provinces. These are exactly the cracks in elite consensus that aggrieved groups commonly interpret as openings for greater protest and opposition (Cheng 2009). Hence, the more the party debates its future, the more it fills the jails to convince its critics and itself that it remains alive. The ruling establishment has good reason to cringe and scowl when they look to the Middle East because they suspect they are watching a preview of their own rapidly approaching fate (LeVine 2012).

THREE PILLARS OF CHINA'S GREATER MIDDLE EAST STRATEGY

Given China's profound ambivalence toward most Arab countries, it seems only natural that Beijing should look elsewhere to safeguard its growing dependence on the long-distance transportation of Middle Eastern energy. China's leaders have paid special attention to a handful of large and strategically positioned Muslim nations that bridge the increasingly integrated markets and societies of the Middle East and Asia. Above all, Beijing has focused its alliance-building on Turkey, Pakistan and Indonesia—military and economic centres that can provide or restrict access to several of the most important land and sea routes in the Eastern Hemisphere. Indeed, Obama's eagerness to reengage the Pacific is a belated and stumbling response to China's rapid success in pushing its

power and prestige westward not only in the Greater Middle East, but to the heart of Europe and Africa as well.

Leaders in Turkey and China share a common awareness that they are heirs of rich diplomatic traditions from Ottoman and Qing eras that distilled centuries of Islamic and Confucian statecraft, blended with more recent Westphalian principles of power politics (Tezkan 2002). Representatives from both countries thrive in the fluid and uncertain world of multilateral bargaining and they are utterly convinced that the historic resurgence of balance of power diplomacy is tailor-made to showcase their skills (Karaca 2008). Moreover, they share a tendency to view their nations' interests in terms of increments of geography and power where every diplomatic link connects multiple neighbours in far-reaching networks that quickly dissolve the boundaries between local, regional and inter-continental politics. Turkish diplomats and scholars never tire of explaining that they belong to a Mediterranean society that is simultaneously Balkan, Black Sea, Caucasian, Caspian, Middle Eastern, Central Asian and, when it suits them, Mongolian and Chinese (Davutoğlu 2001). Their counterparts in China describe a similar progression of westward circles of influence, stressing culture and commerce instead of race and religion.

The match between China and Turkey is a recent and stormy affair made not in heaven but in hard-nosed bargains of realist politicians with overlapping visions of Eurasian leadership (Adibelli 2006, 2007). Ankara and Beijing have had to devise concrete solutions to a constant flow of disputes from turf battles in Central Asia to the plight of Uyghurs in Xinjiang and most importantly, enormous trade imbalances that infuriate powerful business lobbies in Istanbul and Anatolia. Both sides have given ground on every issue. Turkey scaled back its ambitions in Central Asia to trade and education instead of political reform; China accepted regular closed-door meetings with Turkish nationalist parties that champion Uyghur causes; and Beijing has pledged huge investments in Turkish industry and infrastructure. In a particularly symbolic gesture, China even agreed to halt exports of popular *haji* apparel and equipment so that Turkish producers could begin to recover their own domestic markets. Compromise has paid handsome dividends to both parties (Xiao and Wang 2007). Turkey links up to the only economy in the world that is growing faster than its own and reminds its overbearing Atlantic friends that Ankara has heavyweight partners in all directions. China gains a privileged export platform to its biggest customer in Europe and an on-site broker enmeshed in the daily affairs of every Middle Eastern country where superpowers are as welcome as the plague.

Chinese ties with Pakistan have soared to new heights thanks to the spill over of the Afghanistan war and Washington's aggressive courtship of India. The 'enemy of my enemy' logic is irrefutable when the common adversary is so transparent in its long-term intentions. New Delhi's military establishment has responded to increasing Chinese presence in the Indian Ocean by dispatching its own warships to the South China Sea and by aiding Vietnamese oil exploration in disputed waters. In telegraphing its willingness to join an 'encircle China' strategy, India has virtually guaranteed

a Chinese push at counter-encirclement that corrals the smaller states of South Asia against Delhi's over-confidence. The cornerstone of China's South Asian strategy has always been Pakistan, but Obama's Af-Pak War has sealed that alliance more tightly than ever (Lieven 2011).

For over a decade, the turmoil in Afghanistan and Pakistan has frozen competing pipeline projects supported by China and the United States. But with Pakistan tilting decisively toward Beijing, there is every prospect that Iranian oil and gas will eventually flow through Baluchistan and the Northern Territories to Kashgar and then to all corners of mainland China. Islamabad has already given China top billing in the deep-water port of Gwadar on the Arabian Sea, transferring management from Singaporean operators to Chinese rivals and urging Beijing to build additional facilities for hosting submarines. For Beijing, the combined economic and military benefits could be incalculable. Pakistan would be providing a triple windfall—overland routes bypassing the dreaded Straits of Hormuz, eliminating at least part of China's 'Malacca dilemma', and offering Zheng He's modern counterparts a permanent home away from home right on India's doorstep.

Indonesia is the guardian of China's maritime lifelines to the Middle East and Africa (Tagliacozzo, ed. 2009). Less than fifty years ago, its army slaughtered hundreds of thousands of its own citizens because their Chinese race implied Communism and disloyalty. Today, that same nation views China as the driving force of its development and as a historic contributor to its own conversion to Islam. That dramatic turnabout places Indonesia squarely in opposition to any Pacific power—real or imagined—that would target or antagonise Beijing.

Indonesia has long been the centre of Southeast Asia's international relations and in the past decade it has become a global actor as well, thanks to its democratic vitality, natural resources and religious pluralism (Sukma 2009). It has evolved into China's easternmost anchor in Islamic Asia, complementing Turkey in the west and Pakistan in the centre. The inauguration of the China-ASEAN Free Trade Area in 2010 paves the way for massive Chinese investments in infrastructure and industry—investments that Indonesia needs desperately as its oil reserves decline and that it cannot hope to obtain from Japan or more distant capital markets.

The pro-American posture that India is currently trying to assume in the Pacific is precisely the role that Indonesia abandoned after the fall of Suharto. Like Turkey, Indonesia sees its best interests in playing the indispensable balancer between its neighbours and the great powers instead of becoming locked into permanent commitments with a single block. Jakarta has stymied Secretary Clinton at every step in her efforts to internationalise territorial disputes in the South China Sea and to insert the US Navy into policing the Pacific-Indian Ocean junctions.

Muslim politicians in Indonesia are highly critical of Washington's assertions that Indonesia is a centre of international terrorism. They regularly accuse America of Islamophobia and charge that Washington is attempting to undermine their political influence by frightening Indonesian voters. Meanwhile, the same Muslim leaders are

warming to China after decades of alienation. Although they denounce Chinese actions in Xinjiang, they take advantage of every opportunity to expand contacts between Muslims in China and Indonesia. Jakarta has hosted rich exhibits of Islamic arts and culture from China and Beijing has eagerly publicised the small but thoroughly Indonesianised communities of Chinese Muslims in northern Java. Barack Obama enjoys enormous affection in his childhood home, but America is increasingly viewed as a clumsy outsider that requires careful handling by a region determined to chart its own course.

President Obama is quick to assure us that his re-engagement of Asia is not aimed at containing China's dramatic but unsettling rise. Indeed, he often notes that the United States has no choice but to engage Beijing in compromise and collaboration because China's achievements have placed it far beyond containment. Having grasped this much, he must also realise that China is equally beyond encirclement (Johnson and Calmes 2011). As the heads of America's security establishment try to disengage from the Middle East and to execute his Pacific project, they might well ask, 'Mr. President, how do we surround an adversary that has already surrounded us?'

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